

# The Influence of Christian Missions on Pre-Cession Fiji

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THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS ON  
PRE-CESSION FIJI

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In that period of the history of Fiji encompassed by the years 1835 and 1874, the part played by Christian Missions and missionary enterprise is by no means insignificant. Their avowed object was the conversion of the native people of Fiji to Christianity; but that involved a change in every department of their lives — political, social and economic, as well as religious. David Cargill, one of the two pioneer white missionaries to Fiji pointed out before he had been there for five years: "The religion of Fiji is interwoven with the politics of the kingdom, and the economy of every family".

The evaluation of mission work in any field, and particularly in Fiji, should be made in the light of prevailing circumstances — the time, the place and the people. The missionaries who lived and worked in Fiji in the old cannibal days cannot be judged by the same standards as those who came after the establishment of Christianity and British sovereignty.

That there have been critics of the role and influence of Missions in the affairs of Fiji is acknowledged, although one must admit how easy it is to be wise so many years after the events. In this connection it may be of interest to note that the Captains of several men-of-war operating in Fiji waters during the last century — Bethune, J.E. Erskine, Sir Everard Home, Sir Mangles Denham and others — all men of wide experience and sound judgement, have expressed admiration for the conduct and work of the missionaries of Fiji in that period.

The purpose of this paper is neither to defend nor extol the labours of the missions or their personnel but rather to illustrate and highlight by relevant historical events, their influence — spiritual and temporal. The various fields of activity — religious, social, medical, educational and political can be but

briefly covered. Mission history, although the source of information, is not the subject.

The presentation of the Christian Gospel, particularly during the early years of missionary enterprise in Fiji, was fraught with many real problems, not the least of which appears to have been the difficulty of instilling in the minds of the heathen people the practical results that should flow from spiritual conversion. Methodist missionary John Hunt in a letter to a fellow missionary in 1847 stated: "The work of conversion has been going on among our people gradually during the last three years. You are aware that there are generally two conversions—one from Heathenism to Christianity as a system, a second from sin to God. Both these are of the greatest importance. Without the first there is no hope of the second. We seldom witness anything like penitence in a heathen. Generally it is not until they have professed Christianity for some time that they sincerely seek the Lord." Hunt's letter reveals a state of affairs not peculiar to Fiji. A two-stage programme—in which the people are firstly influenced by some means to attend a church, and then by personal contact and instruction led on to conversion.

One of the most effective instruments in missionary enterprise in Fiji proved to be the use and practice of medicine. In 1839 a trained British surgeon, Dr. Richard Burdsall Lyth, arrived in Somo Somo. He can be considered founder of medical practice in Fiji. Some of the missionaries who came had picked up a limited medical knowledge before leaving England. The Methodist Missionary Society in London selected where possible for the South Seas, men who in addition to their spiritual qualifications, had some training in medicine, language, literature or printing. Native patients did receive medical attention for simple ailments by the early "non medical" missionaries, but in this they were often matched by the skill of native practitioners, not all of whom were frauds. Their knowledge of the medicinal properties of herbs was used to advantage. Their surgical skills, possibly practiced initially in front of the cannibal ovens, were well known. David Cargill makes mention of these very points in one of his letters to London in 1839.

After Dr. Lyth's arrival in July 1839, his skills—both medical and surgical—soon overshadowed those of the native doctors. Lyth not only practiced, but imparted medical knowledge to his colleagues, particularly those who lived with him. John Hunt and his fellow workers knew how much the work of the mission could be aided by medical practice. In 1843 Hunt in a letter to London states: "Administering medicine is very important as it is a direct way of attacking the gods of Fiji and getting

hold of the understanding and feelings of the people". The Fijian could readily see that it was the missionary's God who made the medicine effective.

Full use of medicine was therefore made by the missionaries whenever possible to attract people to the mission. The ruling chiefs and their families were accorded medical assistance, which in the event of success resulted in recommendation and royal acclamation.

The first conspicuous success of this class of cures came at Lakeba in 1842. Tui Nayau's favourite daughter, Tagici, fell ill. Missionary Calvert eventually received the King's permission to give Tagici medicine. The King announced that he would waste no more time on the unresponsive gods. Tagici recovered and became with the King's consent, a Christian. She firmly upheld her faith throughout the years although her life was full of sadness.

John Hunt who had lived with Dr. Lyth for 3 years at Somo Somo, was anxious on his arrival at the Island of Viwa to make full use of his medical knowledge and favourably impress the great chiefs at Bau. He was firstly given an opportunity by treating the old King Tanoa, and several members of his family. Hunt on this subject writes: "The only way of obtaining access to Bau appears to be by giving medicine, and this means has already been owned of God in the past year".

At Viwa itself there was an increase in professing Christians although at this stage many appeared to have shown particular interest in the benefits of 'lotu' medicine only.

Although the missionaries without exception valued the place of medical work in their missionary enterprise, none, including Dr. Lyth, ever considered the practice of medicine other than a means to an end in furthering the spiritual interests of their mission to Fiji.

Christian missions in general, and the Methodist Mission in particular, exerted throughout Fiji a powerful and enduring influence on the people by the preparation and propagation of good literature. They too realised that the pen is mightier than the sword. They settled the Fijian alphabet, translated the Bible, printed literature and prepared good grammar and dictionaries of the language. Before undertaking the task of translation, much preparatory work was necessary, including mastery of the idiom of the language.

David Cargill and William Cross first taught the native people to read and write. In 1838 a printing press was landed

and set up at Lakeba; prior to this, manuscripts had to be sent to Tonga. This press was, after careful consideration, moved to Rewa near to which were big centres of population.

Thomas Jaggar undertook the major work of printing, and before long portions of the New Testament, and spelling and hymn books were printed in the Lakeba, Rewa and Somo Somo dialects. The missionaries initially contended that the different dialects should each be covered, but it soon became apparent that printing costs would be greater than they could afford. In a letter dated 15th May, 1844, John Hunt reveals the mind of the missionaries in respect of dialects. He says: "We are commencing the translation of the whole of the New Testament into the Bau dialect, that being more generally known. We cannot print in all dialects, there are too many".

While John Hunt and Dr. Lyth had been engaged in the translation of the New Testament, David Hazelwood was preparing a Grammar and Dictionary of the Fijian language. By 1850 he had completed the manuscripts, and in 1852 the book was printed and published in two parts. It was not until 1914 that the 'Grammar' and 'Dictionary' were reprinted and issued in a single volume. This book, in current use, is considered one of the best available on the subject.

Hunt and Hazelwood were the two missionaries to whom the credit chiefly belongs for the translation of the New and Old Testaments. They were capable students of language and assiduously applied themselves to the work of translating their respective portions of the Bible. Hunt agreed, having completed the New Testament, to undertake also the translation of the Old Testament, but unfortunately before this work was finished he had to lay down his pen forever. The uncompleted task was taken up by Hazelwood. Declining health however compelled him to leave Fiji in 1853 and he finished the translation in Australia. Both Hunt and Hazelwood died in their 36th year.

The first printed copies of the New Testament appeared in 1847, having been produced on the mission press. A larger edition and the Old Testament were later published in England by the British and Foreign Bible Society.

The printing and publishing of literature by the mission bodies continued to expand and diversify and thus become a significant contribution to the spiritual and educational welfare of the people of Fiji.

Although the Missions in the period under consideration appear to have catered reasonably well, through literature, for the 'inner man' including his intellect, this was not matched in



the practical — by the teaching of craftsmanship or in technical training.

The Fijians as a race, even prior to the introduction of the missionaries, were adept in many of their handicrafts such as moulding of pottery, mat making, canoe building, and fashioning instruments of war. With the advent of civilisation to Fiji in the middle of the last century however, the need for technical instructors and training in the arts and crafts became apparent. Two missionaries — Thomas Williams and James Calvert detected this and besought their Society in London to make available trained personnel. Williams, in 1843 made this observation: "The lack of artisans in our Missions is a serious evil. . . . Had I remained in Lakeba circuit another year I intended to have made it my aim to. . . . instruct some of the young men in the simpler branches of mechanics".

Calvert, another tradesman, also expressed concern in a letter to the London Society in 1843. He says: "I would call your attention to a vastly important matter connected with our work in these seas. . . . I deem it right to urge you to do what you can to rescue the people of these seas from degeneration notwithstanding their Christianity, by introducing civilisation and some useful arts and manufacture".

The Methodist Missionary Society however at that time was unable, due to financial stringency, to launch any such scheme as an extension to their mission commitments.

With the possible exception of Hazelwood, none of the other Methodist missionaries in Fiji at that time saw the necessity for the course of action urged by Williams and Calvert. John Hunt, a man possessing intense personal spiritual qualities, was of the opinion at that time that the only means for the effective civilisation as well as the christianisation of the native people, was the Gospel.

For the majority of converts in Fiji at that time there was a definite need for regular practical work to strengthen their character and reinforce and exemplify their inward belief.

Many of the practices and activities with which the converts had been associated prior to their acceptance of the christian faith were discontinued, or discouraged. In this respect they were deprived of many interests that had earlier occupied their time and energy. Initially at least no corresponding activity was available to them which would lift them out of the doldrums. Their newly found faith needed the counter-balancing influence of wholesome physical and mental exercise both of which could have been supplied by the practice of useful arts and crafts as

recommended to the Missionary Society by Williams and Calvert. The Methodist mission in later years wisely utilized the natural aptitude of the Fijians for skilful work by the setting up of training institutions.

The Roman Catholic Mission to some extent at least, recognised the value of instruction in the so called "useful arts of civilisation", and apart from teaching the native people, they set a personal example by engaging in the trades for which they had been trained. That policy has been a continued feature of this Mission, the results of which may still be noted at Rotuma, Wairiki and other mission stations.

The missionaries in Fiji, particularly in the earlier period under discussion, were few in number. Their numerical strength however bears little comparison to the influence which they had amongst the Fijians. The task to which they were committed was mammoth. It was obviously impossible for so few to reach so many, particularly in Fiji, where the 150,000 people were scattered throughout the group of islands. The strategic positioning of mission stations enabled the Missionaries to obtain the maximum effect from their limited resources and manpower. They fully realised their geographical limitations however, and regularly petitioned their headquarters, sometimes pathetically, for more help.

From a comparatively early date in its enterprise the Methodist Mission recognised the necessity for training and equipping of Fijian assistants — teachers, evangelists and assistant missionaries. They worked on the sound principle that the heathen people could be better served by one who was close to themselves. Calvert expressed his views on this: "It is not possible", he stated "to set too high the value of such agents as are raised up by the people. While inferior in many respects, they yet possess qualifications for the work which no foreign missionary can ever fully acquire".

The necessity for a complete and efficient machinery for the training of Native Agents (as they were then called) became more pressing, and in 1841 the Methodist Missionaries initiated a scheme to set up a Training Institute. The first such institution was started at Mataisuva in charge of John Polglase. On his death in 1860 it was transferred to Richmond in Kadavu. In 1873 it was moved to a site given to the Mission by Cakobau at Navuloa where valuable work was done for many years after Cession.

During the early years of missionary enterprise in Fiji, indigenous trained helpers were scarce, as it took several years

for training even the most promising, and until they were ready, the mission depended on Tonga for a supply. King George of Tonga, always deeply interested in the progress of christianity, sent some who deserve to be remembered in the history of Fiji — Joeli Bulu, John Havea, Silas Fa'one and others. These men certainly influenced the course of Mission history and the people of Fiji, for they were pioneers. Besides the centres in which missionaries resided there were dozens of islands and settlements where Tongan and Fijian teachers were stationed long before the white missionary could find time even to visit them. It is important to remember this because it shows how the expansion of mission work in Fiji was effected.

Many of the local teachers had to encounter grave perils. A letter received by Thomas Jaggar of Rewa from one of his teachers in Kadavu gives some idea of the loyalty of these men. The letter was received by Jaggar in February, 1842 and this is his translation of it:- "Mr. Jaggar, I Issac, I make known the thing that has happened at Kadavu; a report very great, a report very painful. Mr. Jaggar, they have returned five times to drive us away, and five times has been nearly our death. Qaraniqio has ordered us to come to Nasalai, and if we come not we then die. How is your mind, the Servant of God, in this thing? Is it good our going hence or good our staying to die? Not weak are our minds in this thing. The chief and his wife and child have turned. I, Issac, I tell you here my mind. Very many are these things. Is it good that I go hence to Rewa? Consider, the Servant of God, whether good or bad". The spirit exemplified in Issac was evident in many others serving in the missions of Fiji.

One may better appreciate the role of indigenous mission assistants by noting that in 1856 there were only 7 English and Colonial missionaries in Fiji and 2 trained British teachers; but there were 8 Fijian assistant missionaries, 107 teachers, and 624 day school teachers, besides local preachers and class leaders.

The full utilization of locally trained personnel has been the continued policy particularly of the Methodist Mission, and this factor has definitely influenced and shaped the pattern of Fijian life religiously, educationally and socially.

The dominating influence of war on the people of Fiji, particularly during the earlier years under consideration, opened up vital issues for those who had embraced christianity. In the middle of last century the inhabitants of Fiji were divided into several communities, each having some measure of independence and subject to a ruling chief. These leaders of the people

were ambitious—vying for power—with the result that the country was kept in a state of ferment. Domination of one group by another could be attained only by the exercise of power in war. It was only after British Sovereignty was established in Fiji in 1874 that inter-tribal warfare could be suppressed. One can appreciate therefore, with the threat of war always lurking in the background, that the personal loyalty of the people to their own ruling chief was of paramount importance. That being so we can understand the charge made from time to time by the chiefs that the loyalty of many of their subjects was being undermined by those who preached the gospel of peace and discouraged their converts to take part in any conflicts whatsoever. That the missionaries were morally right in deprecating war and bloodshed in all its forms will not be denied. William Cross at the close of 1838 was placed in an awkward dilemma by a searching question that was put to him by one of the chiefs. Cross wrote concerning this: "Namosimalua's son (referring to Varani) asked me what those must do who have embraced christianity if Tanoa sends a command for them to kill men for him? I replied that they should say that it is forbidden by God, and therefore we are afraid to do it". In so far as the heathen feared his gods, he could understand the corresponding fear on the part of the christian of his God—Jehovah. Mention has been made of the attitude to war of the christians in Fiji at that particular period in its history, because of the undoubted influence that it had on the course of history in Fiji, both in time of war and peace.

In the war between Bau and Rewa, the Christians at Bau and Viwa had refused to follow Cakobau, and Hunt in a letter written in 1846 mentions that the chiefs of Bau were breathing slaughter against them for their want of loyalty. "The chief at Bau told me distinctly", says Hunt, "that we were the only hindrance to the destruction of Viwa". Cakobau was in fact contemplating the slaughter of every one of the Christians at Viwa, and the only restraining influence seems to have been his personal respect and liking for Hunt. John Hunt was fully aware of this and of the invidious position in which the Christians were placed by their adherence to the doctrine of 'peace at any cost'.

The Methodist Missionary's attitude to war at that time was unequivocal. His position was clearly laid down by the Missionary Society, who stated in their instructions to outgoing missionaries that: "The Committee caution you against engaging in any civil disputes... You are not to become parties in any civil quarrel".

They did not appear however to have considered what would be their duty in the event of a war overtaking them as a result of their own teaching. In such a state of unpreparedness they would be an easy prey for the well trained warriors of aggressive chiefs in the event of war between Heathenism and Christianity. In 1848 such a war did break out at Bua Bay, the station of Thomas Williams at that time. The despoiling of the Christians at Bua by the heathen is a matter of history, and came as a severe shock to Williams, with a consequent break down in his health. As a result of this tragic experience there appears to have been some modification to the views of missionaries on the subject of war. Williams, and indeed all the missionaries however, continued to strive with all their might to curb the ferocity of the heathen. As soon as James Calvert was convinced of the gravity of the situation, he proceeded to Bau to implore Cakobau to use his influence to protect the Christians on Vanua Levu, and put an end to the war. Cakobau's answer reveals his mind on this subject: "I will not protect them" he replied, "and I rejoice that you have now a fight of your own. When I ask you '*lotu*' people to help me, you say No! it is not lawful for Christians to fight!"

"Well", said Calvert, "do you intend to stop the progress of the *lotu*?" "No" replied Cakobau, "I cannot do that. I know that it is true, and the work of God, and that we shall all become Christians, but in the meantime I delight in you Christians being compelled to engage in war as well as me". We do well to remember that Cakobau's statement was made several years before his official acceptance of Christianity (in 1854).

Calvert, realising his colleague, William's predicament, decided in 1851 to proceed to Bau with a band of Tongans and Fijians including the Christian chief Ratu Elijah Varani. They engaged in some fighting, and on one occasion, when attacked by the enemy, two of the Tongans were killed.

The modified views of some of the missionaries were reflected in the attitude of the converts to war. Those christians who took part in war, however, did so in a new spirit; their aim and object being to prevent unnecessary bloodshed and terminate hostilities as soon as possible. This 'humane' approach to war, (if it may be so called), coupled with a new concept of the value of human life, influenced the thinking of many of the Chiefs and their subjects on war, cannibalism, and the strangling of widows. It was the ceaseless task of the missions to eradicate such practices, and one must commend the unflinching approaches of the missionaries to the heathen chiefs on behalf of those prisoners and widows who were about to face death.

Reference has already been made to the influence of medical treatment on the heathen people, particularly during the early period of missionary endeavours in Fiji. From the human viewpoint the task of making known spiritual, unseen truths to a heathen people such as those in Fiji in the early part of last century proved to be a formidable one. It was natural that the outward tangible benefits conferred by medicine influenced the heathen in his view of the Christian religion.

The minds of the Fijian people, accustomed as they were to the display of power through war, were influenced to some extent at least by the evidences of the white man's God — his ships, muskets, printing presses and the like. That this was so does not discredit in the least the ultimate effects of the Christian gospel so faithfully delivered by those early missionaries, both in words and deeds.

The long drawn-out war between Bau and Rewa lasted over 11 years, and although it started because of domestic entanglements and personal enmities among the chiefs, it reached its climax at the Battle of Kaba in April 1855, between two armies, the one heathen and the other Christian. Some of the salient features of this particular battle, together with events leading up to it, will be outlined because they have a definite bearing on the course and progress of Christianity in Fiji.

By 1854 the war between Bau and Rewa was at a low ebb. Cakobau, immediately prior to his conversion, was almost in despair. The Christian King George had urged Cakobau to '*lotu*', and this he did by his public profession of Christianity in April, 1854. It may be interesting to note Cakobau's remarks made 15 years earlier when he disputed for 4 hours with the missionary William Cross. Cakobau declared on that occasion that he would never '*lotu*'. Mr. Cross replied: "If you do not, your children will". "Nay" said the heathen chief, "Though other places may, I will not; and when about to die, I will tell my children not to '*lotu*'".

When Cakobau did eventually accept christianity, Bau, his headquarters, was revolutionized; cannibalism and widow strangling there immediately ceased, and the people were allowed freedom to embrace christianity.

Meantime however the course of the war went from bad to worse, due partly to the desertion by many of his followers who had not accepted Christianity. By 1855 the atmosphere was right for peace — the Rewa people wanted it, Cakobau welcomed it. War was formally ended in February of that year; but the Bau rebels on Kaba still held out. The rebel chief Mara

was joined by other heathen chiefs who had been angered by Cakobau's profession of Christianity. The war took on a new character; it was now a conflict between heathenism and christianity. The timely arrival at Kaba of King George of Tonga with 2,000 Tongan warriors and 1,000 Fijians was the turning point which eventually led to the collapse of the revolt and the restoration of peace.

The events connected with the Battle of Kaba have been described because they mark a decisive milestone in the history and influence of Christianity in Fiji.

In the minds of the heathen people, the<sup>1</sup> God of the missionaries, of King George of Tonga, of Cakobau, and of the Christians, had proved superior to their own gods. There followed a remarkable turning to Christianity on the part of the Fijian people.

A few extracts from an account written to the General Secretaries by the missionary James Calvert describing a visit which Cakobau, accompanied by King George of Tonga made to Rewa and Kadavu will indicate the changes which took place at that time. Calvert relates:

"On the 11th May, King George and all his party accompanied by the Vunivalu... left Bau for Rewa and Kadavu. We spent the Sabbath at Rewa. We assembled in the open air with the Vunivalu and the Rewa people. The sight was immensely gratifying, the change is immensely great. We were in the vicinity of the oven used for cooking the Bauans. Instead of hating, fighting and devouring each other, they are now worshipping God together."

Calvert goes on to say: "I called again at Bureta and there.... a chief of the place said to me: 'The *'lotu'* is true, or Kaba would not have been taken.' At Nakelo.... I met with a chief from another town, who said that all their gods and priests were liars; for they had all promised that Kaba should be secure." Calvert concludes by stating; "It is evident that the most important results depended upon the success or failure of the Tongans at Kaba".

Fiji continued to make progress towards civilisation although this was of necessity gradual. The history of events reveals that the missionaries contributed substantially to the advancement of social, judicial and political life of the people. Within a short period after Cakobau's conversion, cannibalism became entirely extinct throughout a great part of Fiji, and infanticide greatly diminished.

Fijian children were in need of training and protection; child

mortality before and after birth was abnormally high. The programme for education was accelerated enabling both women and children to be taught to read and write.

The missionaries were fully aware of the difficult lot of women. Thomas Williams wrote in 1841: "One thing which the gospel must effect in these lands is the elevation of the female character to its proper standard." Widow strangling had prevailed throughout the islands, and yet, strange as it may seem, the women themselves were not unwilling victims.

Much credit is due to the missionaries in their efforts to suppress these cruel practices, although they were assisted in this by the advance of civilisation generally in Fiji.

The influence of the missionaries on the political life at least in the earlier years, may be considered as indirectly rather than directly applied. Under the terms of appointment Wesleyan missionaries were strictly forbidden to intermeddle in the politics of the country to which they were assigned.

One has no reason to conclude that the missionaries came to Fiji with any other idea in their minds than to convert the people. There was however a contest in the Pacific during the forties of last century between the French and British for imperial supremacy, and the missionaries were aware of it. In 1855 missionary Calvert sensed possible French imperial designs and quite improperly urged the Captain of the H.M.S. Herald then in Levuka to accept Tui Levuka's request for cession of the Island of Ovalau to Great Britain. This proposal was premature and unauthorized. It appears to have been in the defence of Methodism and not primarily with any imperial design that Calvert and his colleagues advocated a British Protectorate. They assumed that French supremacy if realised, would curb their missionary activities and possibly nullify the results of 20 years of their labours in Fiji.

The mission's instructions from their Missionary Society were clear and decisive in connection with the practice of polygamy. It could not be otherwise. In refusing to permit the practice of polygamy amongst their church members, they understandably encountered difficulties in applying this where one party was christian and the other heathen.

In the field of justice, the Mission bodies were influential in introducing, at least amongst their adherents, the beginning of a judicial system in which wrong doing was punished. In the normal state of affairs in Fiji at this early period, the will of the chief was law; custom was very powerful. In 1856 there came a change for the better. A chief at Batiki was tried and



found guilty of murder and a heavy fine imposed. Some credit is due to the missionaries for the desirable change. They had prepared the way for it at their own church meetings. Offenders were arranged in the presence of other members and definite charges were made. The discipline administered was of course purely ecclesiastical, but was an important step towards a system for the administration of justice.

In this brief review of the influence of Christian Missions on Pre-Cession Fiji, it has been impossible to pursue in detail any one subject. Although the pattern of civilisation which emerged during this period was gradual,<sup>1</sup> it was nevertheless definite. Singleness of purpose, and unswerving loyalty to their cause, enabled missionaries and their helpers to lay a foundation upon which both Church and State could build in later years.

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